

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Maya Angelou
1928 --

Writer, poet, performer and director, born Marguerite Johnson on April 4, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. Nicknamed Maya by her brother, her family moved to Stamps, Arkansas to live with their grandmother. In the mid 30's, after the two children had returned to St. Louis to live with their mother, her mother's boyfriend sexually abused Angelou, age seven. A few days later, she was forced to testify at his trial. The boyfriend was later found beaten to death in an alley, allegedly murdered by some of Angelou's uncles. The experience left Angelou speechless, and she and her brother returned to Arkansas.

Maya eventually regained her ability to speak and at the age of 12, became known in Stamps, Arkansas for her intelligence. In 1940 she moved to San Francisco to live with her mother who had remarried. There she won a scholarship in dance and drama, to the California Labor School. She worked part-time then, as the city's first African-American (and female) streetcar conductor. After high school she held a series of jobs, including a nightclub waitress. She was turned down for enlistment in the U.S. Army after her background check revealed that the California Labor School was suspected by the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee as having communist sympathies.

In the early 1950's, Maya made her debut appearance as a dancer and singer of West Indian Calypso music in San Francisco. She also was a dancer in a touring production of *Porgy and Bess*, touring countries in Europe and Asia. She moved to New York in the late 50's, appearing in an off-Broadway play *Calypso Heatwave* (1957) and recording a music album. During this time, she developed an interest in politics and civil rights. In 1960, she authored a revue called *Freedom Cabaret*, which she and her friend Godfrey Cambridge produced, directed and starred in, to raise funds for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She became the northern coordinator of the SCLC in 1961.

She later moved to Egypt and worked in Cairo as an editor at an English-language paper, the *Arab Observer*. In 1963, she moved to the African nation of Ghana, where she worked as a teacher at the University of Ghana's music and drama school and as a writer and editor for the *African Review* and the *Ghanian Times*. Returning to Los Angeles in 1966, she wrote a two-act play, *The Least of These*, and a television series *Black, Blues, Black* that dealt with the role of African culture in American life.

Angelou published her first book, *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, in 1970. The story met with critical acclaim and success. Since then, she has become a celebrated writer and a distinctive voice for African-American culture in particular.

Maya also became famous worldwide for her poetry, nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 1971 for her first volume, *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die*". In later years, Maya published many more popular essays and poetry.

In 1981, Maya Angelou accepted a lifetime appointment as a professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She is fluent in several languages, and currently lives in Winston-Salem.